

# Integration of Information Behavior Theory, Models and Concepts into Basic Reference Courses: A Survey

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study currently underway, exploring the use of information behavior theory in basic master's level courses in reference and information services. The study reported is the third phase of a project which previously examined course syllabi and assigned textbooks, and interviewed course instructors. In the third phase, an online census survey of course instructors at American Library Association-accredited Library and Information Science programs seeks to confirm the findings of the previous interview phase. The conference presentation will focus on presentation of survey results in the context of data from the first two phases, and their implications for education of librarians who provide reference and information services.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

education of information professionals; information services; pedagogy.

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

information behavior; reference and information services; theory; theory/practice gap.

## INTRODUCTION

Understanding how people think about, find, and use information (i.e., information behavior/information practices) has been explored for several decades by information behavior scholars worldwide (Case & Given, 2016). The theories developed from that scholarship are

critical to understanding and predicting information behavior, and are foundational to the design and delivery of effective information services. It is only logical that information services designed and delivered from an understanding of information behavior, including cognition and affect, will assist librarians to better anticipate and meet the information needs of information seekers, regardless of context or demographics. There is some evidence that preparation of librarians for reference work falls short in developing this expertise through their introductory reference courses (O'Connor, 2011), and that professional competency documents do not recognize the value of this body of knowledge (Hicks & VanScoy, 2019).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Practitioners across disciplines tend to organize their work according to a mixture of informal theoretical understanding and practical experience, which is inevitably subjective and lacking in critical reflexivity (Parker, 1977; Reason & Kimball, 2012). Moving more formal theory into practice is a challenge in multiple fields, including Nursing (Landers, 2000; Rolfe, 1998; Repsha, Quinn, & Peters, 2020) and Education (Reason & Kimball, 2012; Evans & Guido, 2012; Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). In Library and Information Science (LIS), the theory-practice gap arises because theorists and practitioners work in different organizational cultures, and appreciate different kinds of knowledge. Certainly scholars must assume some responsibility for ameliorating that gap (Crowley, 2005; McKechnie et al., 2008). Information behavior theory in LIS has a long history (Case & Given, 2016), and a recent study (Lund, 2019) identified the information behavior theories with the highest number of citations to date: Kuhlthau's ISP (1991), Bates' berrypicking (1989) and Taylor's information needs (1968). The degree to which these, and other, information behavior theories, models, and concepts have found their way into education of information professionals who provide information services, is a question addressed in this project. The first phase of the project, which analyzed syllabi for reference courses (including assigned readings, textbooks, and assignments) identified Kuhlthau's ISP (1991), Savolainen's Everyday Life Information Seeking (1995), Taylor's information needs (1968), Dervin's sense-making (1992), and Belkin's Anomalous States of Knowledge (1982), as the theories, concepts, and models most often incorporated into reference courses. The reasons for instructors' decisions about what, why, and how this body of knowledge is incorporated into reference courses in North America were explored in phase two of this project, during interviews with 14 instructors representing diverse positions in the academy and diverse geographic regions (citations anonymized).

## **STUDY GOAL AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The goal of the project is to explore how and why master's level introductory reference and information services courses incorporate information behavior theory, models, and concepts. The research questions addressed in phase three, reported here, are:

1. Why are information behavior theories, models, and concepts integrated or not into RIS courses?
2. How are information behavior theories, models, and concepts included in RIS courses in ways that are not apparent from syllabi and reading lists?

## **METHODS**

Our project has included three phases: 1) a course syllabus and textbook analysis (citations anonymized); 2) interviews with instructors of reference and information courses (citations anonymized); and 3) a national online survey of course instructors (reported here). The survey phase received ethics approval from [anonymized], and was designed to seek generalization of findings from the interview phase. The survey was constructed to take no more than 20 minutes, and was sent directly to all identifiable instructors of reference and information services courses at American Library Association-accredited master's programs in North America (N=63). Recipients of the invitation to participate were asked to share the survey link with other instructors in their programs who may not have been easily identified through web searches (e.g., adjunct instructors). The survey results will be analyzed in time for presentation at the 2021 ALISE conference. The presentation will focus on those results, both quantitative and qualitative, as well as implications for preparation of reference librarians in pre-service education.

## **FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Findings from the syllabus and interview phases of the project demonstrate that a minority of reference courses incorporate information behavior theories, models, and concepts to a significant degree; indeed, nearly a third of syllabi (including readings and assignments) contained no references to information behavior. Where theory is included, it is presented through assigned readings, class discussions, discussion boards, and assignments. Instructors of these courses possess expertise across a range of subjects, but rarely information behavior. They also value theory to varying degrees, and may have limited ability to modify courses they have not designed, and these courses are already content-heavy. It is also apparent that some programs now include a required course which focuses on, or includes to a large extent, information behavior theory, models, and concepts, so that reference courses need not necessarily include that content. While we cannot assume with full confidence that the survey results will mirror the interview phase results, we anticipate that the results will result in a recommendation to substantially increase emphasis on information behavior theory, models, and concepts in pre-service education for reference and information service. That increased emphasis should be encouraged by developing theoretical expertise among instructors of reference courses. In addition, we need to create both expectations and opportunities for information behavior scholars to share their scholarship with practitioners and to increase scholars' efforts to clearly demonstrate the practical applications of information behavior theory.

## CONNECTION TO CONFERENCE THEME

This paper proposal ties to the conference theme in its focus on a project that explores the theoretical underpinnings of a core library service, reference and information services, and the value of that theory to inform practice. We contend that professional resilience is predicated on professionals' ability to anticipate, create, and respond to challenges, both professional and context-related, from an understanding of broadly-based and research-informed theory, rather than reliance on an atheoretical skill set which provides little flexibility and few opportunities for professional growth.

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